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ABSTRACT

This paper presents one researcher's perspective in providing technical research support for the self-evaluation of 10 school-based management (SBM) schools in the Dade County Public School (DCPS) system of Florida. Background information on the DCPS and the SBM program is reviewed. A description of the evaluation process and analysis is provided. Valuable benefits were yielded to both the staff and the schools. This was demonstrated by a review of the anticipated and actual evaluation processes, an assessment of the process, and a discussion of the benefits. As a result of benefits to both the school and the staff who participated in the evaluation process, it was concluded that this model of evaluation should be maintained with minor adjustments. (SI

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THE PROVISION OF TECHNICAL SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL-BASED EVALUATIONS: THE RESEARCHER'S PERSPECTIVE

presented by:

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Statement of Purpose

The 1987-88 school year brought radical changes to the Dade County Public School (DCPS) System. That year the notion of School-Based Management (SBM) was introduced in selected schools. The purpose of this paper is to present this researcher's perspective in providing technical research support to ten SBM schools as they conducted evaluations of their programs. In order to do this, background information on the DCPS and the SBM program will be reviewed. A description of the evaluation process and analysis will follow. Finally, conclusions and recommendations will be posited.

Description

DCPS is the fourth largest district in the nation with approximately 260 schools spread across a large metropolitan area. The system serves over a quarter-million students from diverse ethnic groups. The system is growing about 3% each school year.

The concept of SBM represents a diversion of the dominant model of decision making at the school level. Traditionally, such power is in the hands of the principal. SBM seeks to involve school staff in the decision making process. This is achieved primarily through the formation of a Shared Decision Making (SDM) body. The SDM, at its most fundamental, is composed of school staff and includes teachers and counselors. Their task is to make decisions on various operational situations at the school.

The composition and nature of the SDM is dependent upon the school. In some schools, membership is comprised of representatives of the school's instructional staff. In other schools, para-professionals and ancillary staff (e.g., custodial workers and cafeteria workers) are included. At least one

administrator is also included. However, whether administrative representatives have veto power on SDM decisions varies. The range of the decisions considered by the SDM also varies. Some schools limit decisions to those that directly affect students and instruction. Other schools extend decision making to the overall budget and hiring of new staff. Variability is also seen in the names given to the SDM. Since each school designs their own program, various names for the SDM evolve. These include the Central Committee, the Cadre and Organizational Development.

The SDM, regardless of its name, seeks input from the staff and plans projects that, hopefully, will have a favorable impact on the students. These special projects form the second major ingredient in the formula that is school-based management. The number of projects at a school also varies. They generally range from four to twelve projects.

The individualized approach to SBM in the school system yields even more diversity in the schools' projects. Many center on curriculum issues. Examples of this include the model used to teach Spanish and computer skills. Other projects deal with the organizational aspects of instruction such as scheduling classes in a more unified fashion, converting one teacher unit into four part-time teachers' aide's positions, and providing increased counseling and tutoring services to students. Still, others involved physical plant renovations and an in-school television system. Thus, the underlying philosophy of the SBM program at DCPS is to let the individual school determine the exact nature of the extent of their program. In this manner, creativitiy is fostered and the task of evaluating the program is challenged even further.

Methods and Findings

Despite the problems and growing pains encountered, the evaluations conducted by the individual schools yielded valuable benefits to both the staff and the schools. This conclusion is based on the observation of one researcher assigned to provide technical consultation services to ten schools during the 1987-88 school year. In order to demonstrate this viewpoint a review of the anticipated and actual evaluation process will be presented. This will be followed by an assessment of the process and a discussion of the benefits.

The DCPS undertook a two-tiered approach to the assessment of SBM. An overall evaluation of SBM included interviewing the principals and an attitudinal survey to all participating instructional staff. Additionally, each school was expected to carry out an evaluation of their own SBM program. The individualized school-based evaluations prompted the need for an adaptable evaluation strategy. Thus it was decided that school staff would conduct the actual school-based evaluations. Staff in the schools were to follow the evaluation process used by the school system. This included devising an evaluation plan, designing the data collection instruments, analyzing the data and writing a final report.

In order to meet their needs for technical expertise, a research consultant from the Office of Educational Accountability was assigned to each school. It was originally planned that schools would be visisted approximately four times during the counrse of the school year. Beyond that, it was expected that there would be a certain variability in the evaluation process.

In the course of providing consultation services, this researcher identified a number of major needs in relation to the evaluation process that went beyond the anticipated four visits to each school. There were five major phases of the evaluation process that school staff needed particular assistance with. There were: a) the level of research knowledge among staff (i.e., the school staff's preparedness to conduct an evaluation), b) the familiarity with the DCPS evaluation process, c) the developemnt of the evaluation plan, d) the development of survey instruments, and e) the data analysis/report writing. Each subsequent phase was an extension of the previous one. Therefore, careful and sufficient consultation had to be provided at every step in the process.

Each phase required a specific set of technical skills. But how these were imparted was achieved by a combination of activities based upon the schools' individual needs. The most frequently used strategy by this reasearcher was providing instruction in a workshop format. A large amount of information could be imparted to a relatively large of number of staff. Typically, handouts and examples were used to make the most of the sessions. This underscores the school staff's newness to the field of evaluation and all the work that it entails. The phases that lent themselves well to this activitiy were the initial phases of ensuring a minimum level of research skills (a), the familiarity with the research process (b), and data analaysis/report writing (e). Schools varied in the number of sessions with the researcher needed for each phase. However, rarely were more than three sessions needed by any school for any phase.

The second most frequent type of consultation services provided by the researcher was that of reviewer/editor. Draft copies of written materials were requested so that they could be reviewed for appropriateness,

completeness and clarity. The range of documents was wide - from narrative descriptions of the diverse SDMs and individual projects to survey instruments to final reports. This demanded a lot of patience and perseverance on the part of the school staff. The reviewing process was sometimes delicate. It required trust and respect in the negotiation process that often ensued. The school, having the ultimate responsibility for the evaluation, had the final say in the reviewing process.

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, informal interviewing of staff was used as a needs assessment tool throughout the evaluation process. This flow of information served as a check on the researcher's services offered to school staff.

From the description of the evaluation process described above it can be seen that a significant amount of work was required for the school-based evaluations. The researcher, in the roles of consultant, reviewer and editor used an average of seven days for each school in providing the various kinds of support. That represents a fraction of the work required by the school staff to actually conduct the evaluation. So the time resources needed by each school was great. Along with the demanding workload came a good deal of frustration.

To ease the drain on staff, some schools rotated staff for various segments of the evaluation process. This resulted in a discontinuity which slowed the process down even further. Some consultation services had to be duplicated. For example, one school used a different team of staff for the data analaysis/report writing phase. These individuals had to be be introduced to the DCPS evaluation process which had been discussed previously. Thus,

duplication increased the workload for both the researcher and the staff as a whole.

In providing consultation services to ten schools another area of duplication was seen, this time across schools. Each school's SDM was individually designed which led to wide variability among the SDMs. But in working with the schools a number of common elements were identified. Almost all schools sought to describe their SDM in terms of membership and duties, and to determine its benefits and limitations. With such common themes a standardized approach to evaluating the SDMs may relieve some of the workload for school staff. On the other hand, the individual projects were sufficiently diverse so as to defy any attempt at standardization.

Throughout the entire evaluation process a great deal of resources were expended by the researcher and school staff. However, four benefits were noted by this researcher. First, the evaluation provided the school staff with an opportunity to look at their program in an objective and systematic manner. The evaluation was designed to keep accountability with those responsible for the program at the school.

Second, the data generated could be fed directly to those at the school responsible for refining and planning the program in subsequent years. The data proved useful in this regard since the school staff had planned "blindly" the initial year. One of the most important areas this was seen was in the range of the school's individual projects. For those schools who had many projects (i.e., more than five to seven) the evaluation forced them to look critically at those projects that were given less emphasis, were not working

out or were in need of more resources than could be allocated.

A third benefit was derived from the evaluation plan and report writing activities. These requirements generated more complete documentation of each school's program including the SDM and individual projects. This was an advance over the outline-oriented proposals the schools originally submitted. With a written description, the intent and methods of a project are easily conveyed to someone outside the school.

Finally, the school staff involved in the evaluation were taught some fundamental research techniques and the DCPS evaluation process. While their skill level can be considered basic, many have shown in their later comments how their skills can be built upon in subsequent evaluation efforts.

Conclusions and Recommendations

There are a number of conclusions and recommendations that can be drawn from the experiences described above. They are as follows:

1. The evaluation process at the individual schools demanded a significant time investment by the researcher. Between school visitations and reviewing the materials submitted, this researcher calculated 70 full time days were devoted to consulting with ten SBM schools over the course of the school year. This represents a portion of the workload on school staff since they had to actually conduct the evaluation. The resources needed for the evaluation should therefore be planned into the overall scheduling process for the program at the school.

2. The efforts expended on the evaluation process did, however, reap significant benefits for the school in terms of better program planning and assessment, and for the staff in terms of upgrading their evaluation skills and knowledge of the DCPS evaluation process. Therefore, the fundamental process of evaluation should be maintained.

3. The demanding workload on the staff caused some schools to rotate staff for different phases of the evaluation process. This provided a degree of discontinuity which required some duplication of consultation services. Duplication of services increased the workload for both the researcher and the school staff. Therefore, the schools should carefully choose those individuals involved in the evaluation and relieve them of their tasks in the program.

4. In providing consultation to ten schools, it became obvious that the SDMs do share some common structure/purpose. In contrast, the individual projects varied widely. Thus, a standardized approach to evaluating the SDM may have a favorable impact on the workload of school staff. Such an approach would obviate the need for "reinventing the wheel." Specific projects would still need to be evaluated individually. However, two factors may lessen the workload here. First, future evaluations can be built upon the initial evaluation effort. Second, as mentioned earlier, some evaluation findings indicated a need to consolidate the number of individuals projects at the school.

Summary

The idea of keeping accountability with the individual schools is fundamentally a good one. It is in line with the notion of School-Based Management as expressed in the Dade County Public School System. However, as staff soon discovered, there was much to learn and do in order to generate a meaningful evaluation. Thankfully, there were benefits to both the school and the staff that participated in the evaluation process. Therefore, this model of evaluation should be maintained with minor adjustments made as needed.